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BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political
Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring

September 20, 2001, Thursday

LENGTH: 828 words

HEADLINE: Police officer claims Bin-Ladin's network in Philippines remains intact

SOURCE: Philippine Daily Inquirer web site, in English 20 Sep 01

BODY:

Text of report in English by Fe Zamora, carried by Philippine newspaper Philippine Daily Inquirer web site on 20 September, subheadings as received

Cohesive network

Radical Islam fundamentalist Usamah Bin-Ladin, the prime suspect in last week's terrorist attacks that killed over 5,000 people in the United States, maintains his network in the Philippines through an "informal and invisible command structure" sustained by local Muslims who see him as a "legendary jihad hero", according to a police intelligence officer who has been investigating activities of Muslim radicals in Mindanao since the 1980s.

Police senior superintendent Rodolfo Mendoza told INQ7.net that Bin-Ladin's network, which took roots in the early 1990s, remains intact today, contrary to some reports.

"There is no concrete, visible command structure involving Bin-Ladin," he said, "but Bin-Ladin (and his group) maintains cohesive network with veterans of the Afghan war, and that includes Filipino Muslims who are now either with the Abu Sayyaf, with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) or even with some of the so-called lost commands roaming in Mindanao."

Many "radical Muslims" see Bin-Ladin as their hero and will obey him, Mendoza said. "They draw inspiration from his issuance of fatwa (religious decree) to destroy the infidel".

Bin-Ladin was reportedly sighted in Mindanao in the early 1990s but Mendoza, who said he received the report, said the report was never "substantiated".

A son of a Saudi billionaire, Bin-Ladin became a legend when he volunteered to join the jihad against the Russian invaders of Afghanistan during the 10-year Afghan war. "He was rich, he had all the luxuries in life, but he turned his back on his father's wealth to become a mojahedin," Mendoza related. "He became a legend because of this."

Many Filipino Muslims from Mindanao, among them Abdurazak Janjalani, a young scholar from Basilan who was then studying in Libya, also volunteered to fight in Afghanistan. When the war ended in 1989, Janjalani returned to Basilan where he founded the fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf Group.

Mendoza said Islamic fundamentalism started creeping into Sulu and Basilan in the mid-80s. It was strengthened by Janjalani, who would himself gain the respect of young Muslims for his exploits in Afghanistan.

Budding Islamic fundamentalist groups in Mindanao, according to Mendoza, received financial support from Bin-Ladin through the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) established by Mohamad Jamal Khalifa, who is Bin-Ladin's brother-in-law.

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Khalifa has two Filipino wives identified in intelligence reports as Alice Yabo from Mindanao and Noralyn Zaragosa from Bulacan.

Retired Maj-Gen Benjamin Libarnes, former chief of the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (ISAFP), said Khalifa was monitored in the country from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s where he "gave material support such as seeds, medicines, to groups in Mindanao."

Conduit

Libarnes said Khalifa was a conduit for Bin-Ladin. Khalifa, through his Bulacan-born wife, sponsored the construction of several mosques and madrasah (school) in Central Luzon. Mendoza said Bin-Ladin also "sponsored" the training of foreign mojahedins in the MILF-controlled Camp Abubakar in Central Mindanao in the mid-1990s.

He said Bin-Ladin, through Khalifa, also "funded" several Muslim non-government organizations, including the International Resources Information Centre (IRIC) in Manila's midtown Malate district, which was "used as cover" by Ramzi Yousef, Abdulhakim Murad and four other radicals believed assigned to assassinate Pope John Paul in Manila in 1995.

The group's leader, Ramzi Yousef, escaped the police in Manila, but was later arrested in Pakistan. He is serving a jail term for the bomb explosions at the basement of the World Trade Centre in 1993.

Murad and two others were arrested in Manila in 1995. They have been extradited to the US where they were convicted along with Yousef.

In 1996 Bin-Ladin's "link" to the Philippines was temporarily cut off with the arrest of Khalifa abroad. With the help of US intelligence who have been monitoring Khalifa's activities, Bin-Ladin's brother-in-law was arrested on a warrant issued by a Jordanian court that indicted him in connection with a bomb blast in Jordan.

"Khalifa's network was replaced by a group composed of Jordanian-Palestinians which was activated in 1996," Mendoza said.

Libarnes believed Bin-Ladin's network was crushed following the wave of arrests of suspected foreign terrorists in 1996. Since he retired in 1998, however, Libarnes said he would not know of the recent developments.

Mendoza said the "Khalifa connection" was never cut off. He said that in 1998 there were at least six Muslim NGOs non-government organizations in the Philippines that had links to Bin-Ladin.

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